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Review of “French Theory in America”

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Book Review

French Theory in America, Edited by Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen New York: Routledge Publishing Company, 2001. 321 pages with a 9 page introduction; sources indexed in footnotes ISBN # 0-415-92537-1 (pbk)

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This anthology is divided into two major parts with three supplements functioning somewhat like a musical coda. The objective here is to make as thorough an examination as possible, from a broad range, of a phenomenal interest in America in an approach to thinking "imported" from France since the late 60's and widely regarded as passe since the late 80's. The major theme shared here for the most part is

that what was called “French Theory” was not exactly French nor theory and that it is far from over.

Having become involved with philosophy after the culture wars were already over, I find the work to be very interesting and stimulating, and moreover, it performs a much-needed service in explaining the complicated situation from an informed position. While it is clear from the outset that this is not any attempt at objective journalism (one of the editors was an American publisher of many French theorists), the articles are not tendentious, as was definitely the case in much of the writing of detractors and enemies of French thinking.

While the highly organized and funded detractors of French Theory have been claiming victory, at least since the sensational revelation of the wartime journalism of Paul de Man, this regional clash can be traced back to the Alien/Sedition Act of 1798 and continues today with the name change from French fries to Freedom fries. *French Theory in America* is not socio-political history either, but an attempt by informed insiders to situate and evaluate this phenomenal occurrence. The editors combine material from a wide base to examine so-called French Theory from many possible angles and to consider the factors involved in its initial embrace in some quarters and continued rejection in others and seeming widespread rejection today. The understated but clear conclusion is that the term itself is a misnomer and that the major features of this synthetic Americanized invention have been both absorbed and, ironically, rejected as well. The American philosopher Santayana said that Americans don’t refute, but politely turn away. Politeness may be historic now, but it seems, on the basis of these essays, that this peculiar method or methods of thinking may be scorned, rejected, and ignored but it is not going away. Can of worms or Pandora’s box; it is open now.

The very term “French Theory” itself is incredibly problematic and ironically so. If anything, the core of postmodernism is a suspicion of theory and a rejection of over-arching meta-narrative. Moreover, the situation, in terms of public acceptance of thought and other factors, in France is so different from that in America that there is a question as to the identity of these French writings when interpreted in America.

Of course translation, transportation, and transmission are problematic in any situation. Buddhism imported into China from India is translated through the native conceptuality of Taoism. An ongoing debate concerns whether it is still Buddhism at all by the time it reaches America. These are hermeneutic problems, but they are often overlooked in critique of French “theory.”

The major point of the present text is that French Theory, if anything a synthesis, has been mistranslated, misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misaligned, and that Americans in general have missed the point, if not the boat. French Theory is characterized as like a new language that many students and professors alike have been loathe to learn for various reasons. Its detractors and the press generally have been so vehement as to suggest preemptive strike. The editors, having been publishers of many of these writers, are clearly sympathetic, but are ironic rather than defensive. While French Theory as a fad may be a dead issue, many of the issues have already been absorbed, or as in the case of Deleuze, have yet to be considered. Aspects of this attitude pervade from the first essay by Derrida, who bemusedly refers to the impossible work of deconstruction that should have died, but is still around, to the final supplement which looks back at the Sokal hoax, returned in sequel form, but still plagued with postmodern problems like: What is the purpose and point of this fraudulent entry? The very indeterminacy of meaning of the whole affair, over and above the fake text itself, actually reinforces the conceptuality associated with the author of the first essay, Derrida.

The first of the two major sections contains sample writing from several major French thinkers, in mostly translated English. In this way, the originators of this synthetic phenomenon are allowed to explain themselves first. The reader with little or no acquaintance with the issues and strategies and styles at stake here is as likely as ever to be off-put and challenged. This is not yet another attempt to explain nor defend French Theory, but an examination of the conditions surrounding its involvement with this country.

The first writer, Jacques Derrida, is perhaps the most famous of these thinkers as a result of his work having been considered early on by the so-called Yale critics. The subject here is the term "deconstruction" which he rejected as characterizing his philosophy at first and has been defending ever since. The term has a pejorative ring to it and has forced straw man arguments onto Derrida for decades. With "im-possible" irony, he points out that deconstruction has been over since before it started, and yet, it is still here.

The other essays in the first section, which may at first seem to have little to do with each other, ultimately coalesce into a harmony of multiple perspectives. These writers are often grouped together by their political enemies, but whose samples show radically differing approaches. Yet all can be seen as sharing the major themes of indecidability of meaning, rejection of representation and a calling into question of the ideal self. They can all be characterized, as well, as conceiving of responses and alternatives to the prevailing modes of thought in America, which the editors find to be reduced to utopianism and legalism.

The second essay is a rather personal response from Julia Kristeva for whom the irony of the regional controversy is particularly acute since she is originally from Bulgaria and now divides her time between Paris and New York. Yet more irony and misunderstanding is uncovered in the third essay concerning the late Roland Barthes. Standard explication holds that, because of the view of indeterminacy of meaning and a necessarily ahistorical stance, the French Theorists are apolitical, if not quasi-Nazi. The author here is at great pains to show the reverse of this analysis to be the case with Barthes.

One of the most popular of the French Theorists in the world of art, especially cinema, has been Jean Baudrillard. His essay here carries on his tradition of provocation to faith in reason. Radical incertitude, is for him, as much the case for revolutionary science as it is for French Theory.

The following essay is provided by Gerard Genette, noted French essayist and teacher. Here he reflects upon the course his discourse has taken over the past several decades, moving from a standard mode of literary criticism to a more post modern project of poetics as aesthetic project without being directly linked to a reified concept of French Theory.

The next writer, a biographer of Jacques Lacan, whose neo-Freudian theorizing provided much for the notion of French Theory being ahistorical, plays on the tension between an actual history of the thinker named Lacan and the tendency toward effacing that history by that way of thinking.

The final essay of the first section comes from Gilles Deleuze, to whom Michael Foucault bequeathed (perhaps) the Twentieth Century. The source of the essay is not made clear. Some of them were reprints of papers read at a conference in New York in 1997. Deleuze's paper seems to be directly addressed to a listening audience, but he died in 1996. At any rate, the style is from his later period in which he addressed the question: What is Philosophy? through conceptuality and often used cinema to make his

point. This makes an appropriate essay to finish this section since he is concerned with creativity. One of the most stringent and ironic criticisms of French Theory is that it is supposedly nihilistic and even nazi-istic. Yet, one of the primary concerns for Deleuze, carried over from Bergson and others, is to provide for creativity, inadequately considered since Plato by a status quo that reduced it to representation of an essential ideal.

The second section and the bulk of the book is made up of eight essays surveying the reception of these “alien” ideas in the land of utopian and legalistic thinking. The first article, by a fellow Canadian and former university president, makes a very erudite presentation of the early contribution of Marshal McLuhan to interest in French Theory. Ultimately, the reader should realize that French Theory is an American phenomenon, a synthetic creation that both sublates and distorts the original stimulus. In France, these writers are not even considered theorists, but thinkers, and they have been very divided in their attitude toward McLuhan.

In the second essay of the second section, editor Lotringer makes a major effort, in the longest piece of all, to situate and explain the contributing factors to this hybrid phenomenon. With his magazine *Semiotext(e)*, he sought to thwart academia and art critics with their capacity to incorporate with uncritical acceptance the writing of Baudrillard. Now, decades later, the academic and culture industry have discovered Deleuze and are prepared to flood the market with his “theories” explained, effectively killing him again by explaining him in ways he had rejected and fought for a lifetime.

The subject of the thought of Gilles Deleuze is continued in the following essay through the concept of “blackboxing.” This is in regard to a concept “borrowed” from the sociology of science “that refers to the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success.” The major theme that French Theory hasn’t been refuted nor has it gone out of style (but it has in fact been incorporated so well that it is unnoticable) is developed here. For Deleuze, this is even more problematic because you must forget Deleuze in order to be Deleuzian. That is, someone who would be a follower of Deleuze is missing the point; you must develop your own concepts and when you borrow terminology from science, this is not the fatal strategy that Sokal would claim, but a use for metaphoric purposes quite different.

Co-editor Cohen makes two contributions: one in the second major section and the other in the supplementary section. Both of them are concerned with the discipline of history and its connection with French Theory. The article in the major section follows Nietzsche in seeing normal history as ordinary terrorism. It is for this reason that professional historians have rejected French Theory. This is exemplified here by examining two major journals that purported to be anxious to conjoin new critical research with historic consciousness. Through close reading, Cohen finds that it continues to be the case that historicized speech is a language of power violently imposing meaning through interpretation. Cohen's theme continues in his supplemental essay which finds professional historians to be one of the groups most strongly opposed to “French Theory.”

Yet another group that, as a whole has resisted and the rejected the approach of so-called French Theory, has been professional philosophers in America. An essay by a woman, Andrea Loselle, forced to pursue such interests in the French Literature department, relates her experiences next. Professor Loselle focuses on the practice that did become acceptable, new historicism, whose adherents, instead of using French Theory to critique capitalism, staged a reversal and applied the rules of capitalist aesthetics to theory. Theory is no longer in fashion.

The article by Ravetto analyzes the relation to French Theory which has occurred in the cinema studies department, particularly regarding the problems of feminism. It seems that a very narrow range, a triangulation of semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusarian Marxism; structuralism, has prevailed in American studies. It was mediated through an influential British journal *Screen* and has been incorporated in such a way as to anchor a stable/fixed cultural historical model, a situation which invites backlash.

The following essay is concerned with the reception of French Theory in the world of art and cinema. Once again we find the notion that, though shuffled through the extremes from self conscious adoption to intentional ignor-ance, even though out of fashion, French Theory hasn't gone away.

The final essay, by Mario Biagioli, describes the atypical position of science studies with regard to French Theory. Given that the scientific method is necessarily provisional, it might seem to share a perspective with the critical aspect of French Theory, but in fact, in spite of Kuhn and Feyerabend, the focus has been upon establishing truth claims rather than an interest in the context in which new scientific claims emerge. The author finds the field to be somewhat amenable to French Theory in special cases but generally reluctant to jeopardize the academic position of authority.

The supplemental essays include the one by Cohen, previously mentioned, which ironically concludes that, while research historians have been among the most vehement in rejecting French Theory, the radical reduction in their own numbers by the very forces they are protecting gives them a hollow victory. Another supplement is concerned with the New York school of poetics, and the point is that Americans have already been doing French Theory unawares. Thus, they supplement the point that its not really French Theory anyway and it is an American phenomenon of politics played out on another front.

The final supplementary article is another one by Elie During who here discusses the well known Sokal hoax, which for many nailed up the coffin for French Theory. Admirably, he avoids getting caught up in the details and the never ending but subsiding debate. He does make his subtle point that the very ambiguity concerning the meaning and purpose of the event known as the Sokal hoax and its interpretation serves to reinforce the approach of the French Theorists. Further, it was Sokal who perpetrated the hoax, not Frenchmen nor their American suckers (as Camille Paglia would have it). Effectively, During deconstructs Sokal's use of the myth of the emperor's new clothes to point out the indeterminacy of meaning, if any, of the event itself as anything other than fraud, simulacra.

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